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The Trump Wall: a Cultural Wall and a Cultural War

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ABSTRACT This essay decodes a Wall-DNA in American culture with an examination of two shaping moments in history, namely the Founding Fathers and the Mexican-American War. It argues that the Trump Wall, instead of protecting, endangers American values and opportunities; instead of uniting the nation, divides it and ignites cultural wars. The Trump Wall portends fear, bigotry, distrust, intolerance and disconnection; it is the Trump War. Therefore, this border construction is more of a mental construct than a physical one, especially when it involves a cultural re-landscaping and boundary shifting between the US and Mexico and within the two nations. The essay also challenges a one-dimensional and static view on American values, and calls for a 21st century sophistication for a culturally nuanced definition of what America means, and a 21st century agility to cross back and forth any walls without sparking a war.

The Trump presidency has come as a surprise to many who had not fully realized a wall-building terrain had harbored and produced a wall-builder like Trump. To fulfill his high-profile campaign pledge, presumably, the proposed wall on the US-Mexico border (a.k.a. the Trump Wall) portends a unified front to protect, defend, and define what America is and what makes America great again. It would certainly be self-affirming to be able to erect a "great, great" American wall to stop the illegal immigration from the south and kick out "bad hombres" from within the wall. However, do Americans share values integrated enough, frameworks cohesive enough, and narratives coherent enough to come up with a unified front of American interests and an American cultural identity, neatly delineated by the Trump Wall? The question reopens historical wounds inflicted and sustained by cultural wars since the Independence War against the British Empire.

Ignited by the unbridgeable divide in race, religion, gender, class, sexuality, and ability, the cultural wars have been fought along the American history at different times and in various contexts. Starting from the Founding Fathers to the present day, attempts have been made to forge a coherent American narrative so that an American cultural identity can be constructed. The Trump era writes such an American narrative by intensifying racial tensions and heightening xenophobia, which lead to a "compulsory patriotism" rallying behind "American" interests and values.¹ After more than a year, the Trump presidency has made it abundantly clear that there is no one single America but multiple ones intersecting with one another, and he is the president of the divided states of America. The cultural war on who has a say about what America is or should be did not start from the Trump era, but has been fueled and repurposed by his racist, misogynic, and anti-Muslim rhetoric among many other derisive statements about minorities and marginalized groups. In the crossfire of the cultural war, this essay has its focus on racial and cultural fronts within the US society.

The nation's narrative has already been inherently divided by the white protestants of European descent, the African Americans, the Muslim Americans, the Hispanic Americans (Mexican immigrants in particular), the Asian Americans, the American Indians, the LGBTQ Americans, and the disabled Americans. However, the ownership of Americanness

is not equally shared as there can only be one ruling group to have a say about American values and interests. History has proven that European descent and white Americans have always occupied that culturally authoritarian center. Many of this group responded enthusiastically to Trump's slogan "Make America Great Again." When delving into Trump's support base, Jesse Myerson in her *Nation* article "Trumpism: It's Coming from the Suburbs—Racism, Fascism and Working-Class Americans" differentiates two types of white Americans, the working class and the affluent ones.² To her the poor whites are mere scapegoats and "Trump's real base, the actual backbone of fascism, isn't poor and working-class voters, but middle-class and affluent whites" who are "often self-employed, possessed of a retirement account and a home as a nest egg . . . could become the haute bourgeoisie—the storied 1 percent."³

To grasp how the cultural wall results in the cultural war, let's zoom into the group that the Trump Wall appeals to—the populist wall building group. This is a significantly influential group and played the support base for Trump during the 2016 presidential campaign. Many of them are from the Rust Belt, disenfranchised and left behind by the globalization. Not really equipped with college education and not really conversant with twenty-first-century global landscape and knowledge, they believe that their economic opportunities are taken away by Mexicans and other foreigners, worry that Spanish is taking over English, that American values get eroded due to legal or illegal immigrants, and that co-existence with non-Christian traditions and non-white European heritages threatens what they grew up with. In that sense, a wall would be a clean cut that draws an impassable line to include those who share their worldviews and their cognitive frameworks, and exclude those who hold a different perspective and believe an evolving and transforming definition of what America is.

When Trump signs the executive order and vows to build a "great, great" wall on the US-Mexico border, two things have happened. First, a wall-mindset has been brought to light from underneath. Second, a cultural war on cultural walls is breaking out. In making America great, history is replete with race-, culture-, and religion-based selections, ejections, rejections, and exclusions. There has always existed the need for a wall to filter in and out individuals, groups, and ideas. The filtered-in get to celebrate and shape America and the filtered-out absorb humiliations and sustain injuries and bleedings. In the greatest democracy on earth, equivalent to the biblical promised land, a wall that divides and hierarchizes races, cultures, and religions is bound to instigate cultural wars.

Emboldened by Trump's culturally encoded message to "Make America Great Again," bigotry and hatred towards those who are from a non-white race and a non-Christian religion has been openly displayed. The n-word has come back to the English vocabulary, hate crimes committed against Muslims are no longer a surprise, the undocumented Mexican immigrants live in daily fear for deportation, and Asian Americans are reminded of the days when the Chinese Exclusion Act and Japanese Internment Camps were in place. Somehow the clock in 2018 is turning back, and somehow the basic human rights for racial and cultural equality achieved through bloodshed from previous cultural wars are now in jeopardy. The country in the depth of its psyche engages in a new cultural war along both sides of the Trump Wall.

In a 2004 issue of *American Literary History*, Malini Johar Schueller gathers a collection of "essays on Native American interpellation (Magdaleno), Caribbean women (Cobham), Arab Americans (Majaj), Puerto Rican identity (Flores), Filipino-American identity (Strobel), and African American and Chicana writers (Salazar)," and aligns them in an interplay with the ruling class' central position.⁴ From a postcolonial perspective, Schueller acknowledges cultural, historical, and identity issues within specific minority communities, and testifies to Homi Bhabha's ideas of hybridity or third space.

Nonetheless, there has always existed an established and authoritarian narrative dictating and programming an American cultural mind. As early as 1893, when Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier Thesis points out an American character forged upon crossing westward frontiers, the cultural space of the indigenous and the African Americans are completely left out of scene. The Frontier Thesis often deems them as barbaric non-entities, and inferior to the grand character-building of those of European descent, the protestant base, and white race. James Morone traces back to the generations of the 50s and the 60s, highlighting the two trends, embodied in Daniel Boorstin's trilogy *The Americans: the National Experience* (1965) and John Hingham's essay "The Cult of American Consensus: Homogenizing Our History" (1959).⁵ One essentializes the national experience à la Turner and one begins to give voices previously unacknowledged.

The Trump era polarizes the two directions—the essentialized and the pluralistic—in defining American interests, values, and cultural identity. The essentialists inside the wall consider themselves defenders of American values and economic opportunities. The pluralists on the other side of the wall are enemies who disrupt American way of life and invaders who take away American jobs, and make the country "un-American," euphoric term of "un-white." The Trump Wall will be built on US-Mexico border, a battleground where a black-and-white scheme places everyone in an "us-or-them" position. Such a dichotomous scheme energizes the populist supporters of the Trump Wall and boxes more than half of the population into the category of the less American or simply the un-American. "Americans" and "un-Americans" confront each other as adversaries.

When we turn our eyes onto the polarizing, the speech and act of cultural exclusion surface more explicitly than ever since the civil rights movement; they collide with the values of multiculturalism and multiracialism. This leads to more fundamental and yet perennial questions head-on: who defines American values and shapes American cultural identity? To whom does the American culture belong? An attempt to answer these questions catapults one into the forefront and the crossfires of the cultural war in the aftermath of Trump's rise to the presidency. More than a decade ago, Schueller situated the cultural war under postcolonial lenses: "Once we begin to think of Native Americans, Mexican Americans, African Americans, and Asian Americans as part of the subjects of America, the questions raised by a postcolonial American studies rapidly change. Models of internal colonization are implicitly assumed."⁶ In his presidential address to the American Studies Association in 1989, Allen F. Davis critiques provincialism and chauvinism in American Studies, and highlights "a number of scholars worried about this uncritical patriotism and nationalism."⁷ In a baffling moment of history like this, the Trump slogan "Make America Great Again" appeals to a patriotism, but an "uncritical patriotism," if not a "compulsory patriotism" and a cultural "chauvinism." This causes a new cultural war as a result of the "internal colonization" that creates a neat hierarchy with European descent, protestant religion, and native English language on the top and the center. The Americans who do not fall into the top category now need to reevaluate if they fit with the "American standards" devised by those at the top and the center. Some, especially African Americans, Muslim Americans, and DACA recipients, have to struggle to find or relocate a space and a place in the Trump's Great America narrative. The Trump Wall divides and decides who gets to be within the wall and who gets out. The two sides of the wall wage a familiar cultural war, but now the Trump Wall is in between as a battle line, culturally and psychologically.

In a fear- and distrust-filled time, an attempt to assert a position on either side of the Trump Wall would undoubtedly catapult one into crisscrossed currents and fires of emotions, identities, values, ideas, beliefs, and political positions, thus opening a giant can of worms that cross walls and enter wars. The ones inside the Wall have been winners of

history and have enjoyed the democracy that the Founding Fathers had envisioned, fought for, and laid out in US nation-building and American citizenry. Although there are undeniable frictions and competitions among the “insiders,” they find themselves immediately aligned once they face the challenges or perceived threats from the “outsiders.” The similarities in race, religion, cultural practices, and, in some cases, linguistic affinity draw an exclusive line in a multiracial and multicultural America. The Trump Wall parallels such an exclusive line and helps to “filter through” cultural “impurity.” This cultural war is about whether to hold firm the exclusive line or break through it so that the “insiders” and the “outsiders” mingle and share the same cultural space and political place. A non-negotiable and obsolete center-periphery posture brings about the fight about cultural borders and creates borderlands.

Schueller’s essay further points out that “the borders school, influenced most significantly by Chicano/a studies, is the domain in which the most productive exchanges with postcolonial studies will be carried out, particularly in the shared areas of transnationalism and diaspora, whiteness studies, and feminism.”⁸ If we transplant the argument into the current cultural warfare in US society in 2018, transnationalism, diaspora, whiteness studies, and feminism take on a whole new meaning. Chicano/a studies, with its distinctive discourses on borders, borderlands, fluid national and cultural identities and shifting linguistic codes, should cause both sides of the Trump Wall to stop seeing cultural and racial differences as antagonistic and dichotomous, but see them as dialectic and interdependent. The Chicano model compels both “insiders” and “outsiders” of the Trump Wall to redefine an American cultural identity in an evolving and non-fossilized landscape. Further, the location of the US-Mexico border wall or the Trump Wall cannot be more appropriate to revisit of the Mexican-American War (1846–1848) and cannot be more pertinent to an up-close examination of the origin of the cultural wall and war that the nation is engaging in 2018.

As early as in 1987, in her *Borderlands/La Frontera: the New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa poignantly stated: “The U.S-Mexican border es *una herida abierta* (an open wound) where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds.”⁹ The current geographical border between the US and Mexico was created and born from the hemorrhage of the Mexican-American War nearly two centuries ago. It is a line of collision and clashing. To the winner, the border is a trophy, a demarcation of newly acquired property, and an institutionalized claim of ownership; to the loser, a dismemberment, a reduction, a wound, and a bleeding scar.

Three decades after Anzaldúa’s testimony, President Trump has literally brought border subjects like Anzaldúa back in time on the “great, great” wall, a painful reminder of Mexican lost territory. Trump’s threat to ask Mexico to pay the cost represents nothing but a neocolonial humiliation. The Trump Wall reopens the historical wound and cuts with precision the scar fresh and deep, which has been in a healing and regenerating over the almost two centuries. It is done this time with the intent to push Mexicans and other Central Americans to jump off the wall to the other side. Budget Director Mick Mulvaney is doubtful of the purpose of the wall, and speaks out: “This doesn’t stop drugs and doesn’t stop criminals from crossing the border, in fact it doesn’t stop hardly anything from crossing the border.”¹⁰ Alice Driver believes that “the Trump’s Mexico Wall would be a gift to the drug cartels” and calls it “a throwback to a bygone era.”¹¹ Driver slams Trump’s arguments that a wall would stop many of the drugs from pouring into this country and poisoning our youth, and argues,

The tricks of the multibillion-dollar drug business include using drones, submarines, ultralight planes and even frozen sharks to transport product across the US-Mexico border. Just consider that in 2016, US Customs and

Border Protection Air and Marine Operations agents attempted to seize a submarine in the Pacific Ocean with nearly \$194 million worth of cocaine.¹²

In “Crossing between the Great Wall of China and the ‘Great’ Trump Wall,” I compare Trump with the first Chinese Emperor Qingshi Huang who builds the Great Wall of China to fence off northern “barbarians” and invaders so that the Chinese (the Hans’) culture would be “pure,” and the commencing emperor would keep the flags on the newly expanded frontiers of the Empire.¹³ Nonetheless, as examined above, the Trump Wall intends to preserve the “purity” of American culture and appeals to the economic and political interests of a significant segment of the population inside the wall. With a horizon blocked and a space confined by the wall, the egocentrism and the ethnocentrism of Trump attempts to make America great again, just like Qingshi Huang whose egocentrism and ethnocentrism attempted to make the newly unified Chinese Empire glorious for the ten-thousand generations to come. The Trump Wall proves nothing but a continuation of the Mexican-American war that cut Mexico apart and took away its territory for the up-and-coming American empire’s expansionism.

Lacking a sense of the past and with a distorted view on the present, the Trump Wall deters and is detrimental to a growing and evolving American cultural identity. From the racial and cultural hierarchy, Trump has inherited a closed, exclusive, and static framework in dealing with the crisis, the challenges, the possibilities, and the fluidity that pertain to the globalization of the twenty-first century. His wall mentality is not inconsistent with those of the wall-builders in history and particularly in the past a dozen of years. On December 16, 2005, the House of Representatives passed Congressman Duncan Hunter’s (R-CA) amendment to the border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Control Act of 2005. This called for mandatory fencing along 698 miles of the almost 2000-mile border, that is, building “un muro” (a wall) to cut through again the dismembered territories that used to be part of the Mexican body.¹⁴ To deter, cut, and block Mexican and other Central Americans’ crossing has become a widely endorsed call, because it has “fittingly” become a synonym for defending American interests and American values in the north of the fencing. Self evidently, the border fencing or the muro/wall building between the two countries intensifies the cultural war. The reinforced fence along the entire US-Mexico border in general, and around the area of the Rio Grande Valley in particular—a major battle ground in the Mexican-American War—is crudely evocative of a historic wound and makes it bleed again. Hunter’s amendment does not really have any regard to history. President George W. Bush signed the Secure Fence Act of 2006 on Oct 26, 2006. Subsequently, triple-layered fencing and sometimes a vehicle fence are frequent sights along the border. For more than a decade, ironically, the US lawmakers have been reopening the wound or the scar (in Anzaldúa’s term) culturally while doing their jobs to secure the border. Trump is now determined to make this cut even deeper. One can only imagine the pain and hurt that the US administration’s approach would have brought to Gloria Anzaldúa if she were still living among us.

On the surface, the Mexican-American War was waged for territory dispute and economic interest. In the wake of the 1845 US annexation of Texas, the armed conflict between the two countries lasted from 1846–1848. President James Polk’s (D) expansionism towards the Pacific coast and its military superiority poised the US in a position of a “conquistador.” In the meantime, the post-independence instability, political discordance, and unformed economic infrastructures debilitated Mexico militarily and fragmented the already divisive country. Not surprisingly, the two countries ceased fire with the humiliating Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which required that Mexico cede the territories of Alta California and Santa Fe de Nuevo Mexico to the United States. In return, the US agreed to pay “\$15 million compensation” for the war damage and assumed

\$3.25 million of debt owed by the Mexican government to US citizens.”¹⁵ The boundaries between the two countries were remapped by an invisible but impenetrable wall, erected by the Mexican-American War.

In the depth of cultural life on both sides of the invisible but impenetrable border wall, new demarcations of internal cultural walls were sprouting. On the Mexican side, the war was a dismemberment of an integral body and a national humiliation. The country had to adjust its chopped body to a new physiological configuration to become a whole again, not unlike the aftermath of the Spanish conquest that wiped out the indigenous populations, languages, religions, and ways of life. Mexico was born from the blood of the clash with the walls imposed by the Spanish empire. Spanish language and Catholicism were two transplanted vital organs that made the Aztecs, the Maya, and all other indigenous groups Mexican. The US conquered the neighboring nation again with the Mexican-American War. When the sovereignty is not respected, the cultural identity is shattered, and the way of life is violated, there is going to be a cultural wounding and lamenting. From then on, Mexico acknowledged the loss of Texas, and, thereafter, the Rio Grande as its national border with the US. The Mexicans entered a soul-searching period for their post-independence cultural and national identity. In the face of the military might and economic superiority of the US, should the Mexicans see the US as a new “protector” and “master,” or a second colonizer after the Spanish? Are the Mexicans, so divided and so lost, not even able to come up with a self-defined national identity? Who are Mexicans after all? Spanish? Indigenous? Americans? Is it a nation waiting to be told who they are? The Mexican Revolution (1910–1920) was a revealing point where diverse schools of thoughts found themselves in chaotic and violent competition and bloodshed to address these questions. The cultural walls are once again built in the depth of a collective Mexican psyche. They engender both external and inner conflicting versions and interpretations in the process of defining and redefining a nation and its culture—as well individuals who populate that culture and that nation. Mexican Noble laureate Octavio Paz depicts an elusive Mexican identity in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, hidden behind the masks of the indigenous and the Spanish for the fear to be crushed by cultural “conquistadors” and colonizers. Then, the renowned Mexican cultural thinker and writer Carlos Fuentes carries on this notion. Fuentes’s *The Death of Artemio Cruz* dissects the intertwined layers of the pre-Columbian, the Spanish, and the Americanization in building a Mexican and a nation’s character. Both Paz and Fuentes send out an unequivocal message of the cultural walls due to the colonialization and the neocolonialism in the complex Mexican psyche. In the meantime, both of them fight passionately for a chance to develop an autonomous and standalone Mexican culture in relation to the past and current superpowers who have left undeletable prints and colors south of the Trump Wall.

On the north side of the Rio Grande in the US, the Mexican-American war prompted anti-imperialist and anti-slavery waves, mainly led by the Whig Party. It shook up the cultural walls established by the colonists, the Founding Fathers, and the patriots, who had organized the world into the insiders and the outsiders along the American cultural wall(s). The Whig Party and expansionism pushed American racial and cultural hierarchy into a new terrain, broadened and yet more complex than the original founding ground. The Mexican-American war intensified the already bitter debate over the expansion of slavery to the newly acquired land. This culminated in the American Civil War. In a cross-cultural mirror, like Mexico, the US also entered a redefinition of national sovereignty and cultural identity. Who is more powerful? England? France? The Atlantic world? Or the emerging power of the US? Within the same existential space, how should the white people relate to the black, and now to the Mexicans who were once colonized by the Spanish? The cultural foundation laid by the Founding Fathers, and the cultural and racial walls erected by slave owners and subsequent colonists had to be remodeled now. The

wars fought between the colonized Americans and the colonizer British takes on a new meaning, as the colonized (the white Americans) are now the “colonizer” and the “ruler” in the North American continent. With each demolishing of a wall, there comes a renewed cultural and racial confrontation, resulting in a new war; with each war there comes a new wall and a new erection and exclusion.

Still on the north side, the shift of the Mexico-US border left many Mexican citizens separated from their own government and became aliens in their own land. For the indigenous who had never accepted Mexican/Spanish rules, the change in border meant a second colonization and violation, through and through. These are the subjects doubly lost in multi-layered invasions and impositions. The cultural wars not only created new winners and losers but also an interlaced borderland where walls are in constant realignment to reflect what they encircle. The Mexican-American war erected an invisible wall that demarcates a visible border and a borderland of bilingualism between and within the two nations. Thus, the demarcation is twofold: a geographic line and a cultural line. One is fixed and physical to the naked eye, and one is fluid and psychological in our minds and hearts. The two are in eternal confrontation and negotiation, that is, in an incessant wall-and-war with one another. If a border subject holds onto Mexican heritage, then s/he is deemed as unassimilable by the Anglo; if a border subject holds onto American values, s/he is perceived as a cultural traitor and called a “banana” (brown outside and white inside) by Mexicans. The borderland is prone to cultural walls and cultural wars between groups as well as within an individual’s mind and heart.

Contrary to Trump’s worldview, the visible and invisible walls on the US-Mexico border can never forcibly sever and cut clean historical, economic, social, ecological, cultural, and linguistic ties between the two sides. Instead of walling “outsiders” out and warring the “pure” American values, a cultural “mestizaje” consciousness à la Anzaldúa needs to be brought to light and cultivated.

Kara Keeling and Josh Kun in their “Introduction: Listening to American Studies” embark on the quest: “What role can sound play in analyzing contemporary debates around empire, immigration, and national culture? Where is sound in the cultural and political legacies of ‘American’ culture and where is it in the long history of U.S. nation-building?”¹⁶ As it turns out, our search merges with theirs on the other side of the Trump Wall—the outside where “‘American’ formations of race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, community, and class . . . has the birth of recorded sound in the late nineteenth century.”¹⁷ During that time, in performing arts and music, “the distinct sound of American selfhood . . . was likewise exclusive of African Americans, Native Americans, and women in general.”¹⁸ There were visible walls blocking a comprehensive picture of American reality and silencing the voices that are not inside the wall. It is understood that Americans make sound and blacks/Indians make noise.¹⁹ Since the late 1960s civil rights movement, the concerted effort to include diverse voices mounts to “dismantle dominant hierarchies of knowledge production and critical thought.”²⁰ Such an effort has been embraced by “scholars working within postmodernism, cultural studies, postcolonialism, feminism, queer studies, critical race and ethnic studies, and indeed American studies in general.”²¹ These voices continue their audibility “impacting ‘American’ identities in the age of globalization.”²² We on both sides of the Trump Wall, especially those inside, need “the broad, flapping American ear,” as described by Henry David Thoreau, to listen to how the mestizaje consciousness sounds and speaks.²³

In recent years, many scholars and intellectuals have brought themselves into public squares to join the cultural war and fight for what they believe to be true American values. “Over the past two decades a powerful body of work investing concepts of social difference in relation to representation and social power has developed in the US and

spread well beyond the academy.”²⁴ In 1996, Jane C. Desmond and Virginia R. Domínguez give distinctive acknowledgment of the Spanish speaking community intertwined with the US history, but kept outside what I have characterized the Trump Wall: “Expanded acknowledgement of the intertwined histories of Latin America and the United States has begun,” and it goes in the outside-to-the-inside direction.²⁵ “The migration of people from Latin America to the United States, the historical contests over the US border, the theorization of cultural borderlands, and the development of Hispanic population in the United States,” all deals with the crossing of a cultural wall at different levels.²⁶ However, there is a huge distance between what an academic or an intellectual can do in the cultural war and what Trump is doing with his chain of political events.

During the 2016 presidential campaign, Donald Trump called for the construction of a much larger and fortified wall, estimated at \$8 to \$25 billion to be paid by Mexico. Deeply wounded, the Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto said his country would not pay, and compared Trump’s rhetoric to the former dictator of Italy Benito Mussolini. On January 25, 2017, the Trump administration signed a Border Security and Immigration Enforcement Improvements Executive Order 13767. On July 27, 2017, the House voted to approve a spending bill with \$1.6 billion to put toward a wall all along the US-Mexico border, fulfilling a high-profile campaign pledge from Trump. CNN states:

Despite Trump’s pledge to make Mexico pay for the wall, the bill earmarks taxpayer money to construct a carrier along the southwest border. . . . House Republican leaders tucked it into a procedural measure that set the debate plan for the so-called “minibus” funding bill for several federal agencies. The bill passed 235–192 mostly along party lines.²⁷

Once again, the idea of a wall has been consistent in the US politics since 2005. The consistency lies with a sense of national security and protection. A US-Mexico border wall is intended to protect US political and economic interest, protect the country from terrorism, drug-trafficking, as well as a mechanism to check the flow of illegal immigrants from Mexico and Latin America. The Trump Wall triggers out a series of cultural wars with Mexico and within the US, reminiscent of the cultural debates of anti-imperialism and anti-slavery in the second half of the nineteenth century.

While the federal government is pressing ahead with its plans for the wall, more than 200 companies have reportedly responded to an invitation from the Department of Homeland Security to submit designs for a wall along the US-Mexico border, “nominally 30ft tall, that will meet requirements for aesthetics, anti-climbing, and resistance to tampering or damage.”²⁸ The contest was planned to take place in the summer of 2017 in the border city San Diego. A cursory look of the interested vendors reveals “a can of cultural worms” fighting and competing for a space on the wall, to be held as the American cultural icon. To illustrate the cultural war by the Trump Wall, I have selected a few representative “worms” from James Cook’s article for BBC News, “100 Days:What Might Trump’s Border Wall Look Like?”²⁹ Let’s distill and interpret the cultural war suggested in his article.

An Illinois firm, Crisis Resolution Security Services, has promised a wall “as pretty as the Parthenon,” which signals that Eurocentric culture—with Greek-Latin origin, Anglo-Saxon heritage, and English language—define what America is.³⁰ Parthenon, icon of Western civilization, is therefore intended to exclude those on the south side of the Trump Wall from the definition of America. It is hoped that the image of Parthenon will be powerful enough to deter any crossers who do not fall into the walled definition, and powerful enough to call upon those who fit that definition to defend their group from the top of the wall. The design ignites a cultural war on what America is and who should get inside the Trump Wall. The cultural war monopolizes the meaning of the West, and reveals cultural

ignorance about the influence of the Greek antiquity on the cultural heritage in the Spanish-speaking world. Thus, the cultural war denies the participation of millions of Spanish speakers, as contributors and agents, on both sides of the wall in the American/Western culture. Moreover, if the US is exclusively linked, through the Trump Wall, to a Western classic canon and an Anglo-centricism, then at best, the clock is turned back to the 1700s, and at worst, the wall echoes and energizes a monolithic alt-right worldview that reminds us of race-based elimination of certain individuals and certain cultures.

Another vendor, California's Concrete Contractors Interstate, suggests an "aesthetically pleasing" wall of polished concrete, embossed on both sides with artwork showcasing "various cultures and communities" along its route.³¹ So, the Trump Wall, instead of blocking cultural flow, will be transformed into a multicultural connector and a celebration of an inclusive global world. What a drastic counterstatement against the one of the Illinois firm! The California firm sings a multicultural Kumbaya and sends a message of respect, acceptance, tolerance, and peace. However, can the visual message of peace and harmony overcome the bigotry and the fear that the Trump Wall promulgates? To what degree can this utopic and cohesive picture by the California company be realized in a deeply divided America? All this remains to be seen.

Then, there is a Texan company called PennaGroup of Fort Worth. Its boss Michael Evangelista-Ysasaga is Latino and 80% of his staff are Mexican American. "The PennaGroup throws its hat into the ring in the contest for the best design of the wall."³² Once the word got spread, Michael Evangelista was immediately branded as a cultural traitor, disgraceful to his own people—the Hispanic community. How can someone with a Mexican heritage contribute to the building of the Trump Wall? Subsequently, he has received "at least a dozen death threats" and numerous insulting voice mails on a daily basis, from "his [own] people."³³ In the cultural war, one has to take an exclusive side; there is no middle ground and no tolerance for a fighter like Mr. Evangelista. An American business man who happens to have a Mexican heritage confuses the warring sides and stirs up unprocessed raw hate and distrust. From American side, he is too Mexican and perhaps complicit with illegal immigrants. He will never be able to cross the cultural wall to be a "full American." From Mexican side, he is too gringo and heartless towards his own culture. He will never be able to reach out from the wall to be a "full Mexican." In truth, Mr. Evangelista is disturbed by rumors that rival firms are proposing electrified fences or razor wire. He believes there has to be a humane and non-lethal option in building the wall and he can offer that option. So what cultural position should Mr. Evangelista take in participating in the contest or the cultural war? Should he, or should he not be responding to the invitation by the Homeland Security? Is a black-and-white, neat and orderly cultural war an answer to his dilemma? Can a neatly designed and costly Trump Wall, just approved by the House with a \$1.6 billion spending bill on July 27, 2017, address and answer these fundamental questions that are laid in the depth of a collective psyche?

If a unified delineation is what the Trump Wall intends to accomplish, his wall overshadows an interconnected and flattened landscape, further divides the already unbridgeable cultural spectrums, and polarizes emotional forces that grab headlines on a daily basis in the nation's life. The Trump Wall fuels the sentiment to exclude and kick out. It fosters the fear and bigotry of those who feel that their core values are threatened and their opportunities are taken away by the wall-crossers. So, there are multiple sets of cultural values in twenty-first-century America at work. Far from being cohesive, coherent, and integral, we often find these values competing, confronting, and mutually exclusive. The Trump Wall represents one of them, but intends to make it the only set of

American values for everyone to embrace. Thus, the Trump Wall embodies a cultural wall that provokes cultural war(s).

The truth is that Trump era does not invent a divisive and war-inducing wall and Trump is not the first wall builder. The divisive mechanism had always existed since the dawn of human race and since the inception of our nation. The walls, castles, and fortifications have been designed and erected across time, space, and cultures, to include and to exclude at once. The Trump Wall, in the name of "Make America Great Again," excludes more than includes. More than a brick-and-mortar construction, the Trump Wall is a cultural divide. It extends not only on the border between the US and Mexico, but also on the borders between Christians and Muslims, between immigrants of any origin and those who consider themselves more than anyone else, between the white and the African American, between any races and any creeds, between the heterosexual and the homosexual, between women and men, so on and so forth. A divisive wall-mindset draws an ethno-, culture-, and power-hierarchy, and fuels fear, bigotry, and distrust. It has energized the alt-right movement that advocates white supremacy and entitlement; it rejects a diverse society and a multicultural/multiracial democracy. Trump enables the wall to be more vertical and visible than before, reminding us of an era when democracy and unalienable human rights were only meaningful to certain groups and not to all.

When it comes to American cultural identity, it is abundantly clear that there is not a cultural uniformity but warring cultural voices. American society has been divided into multiple dimensions and spectrums by multiple walls. The contest for the best design for the Trump Wall is in fact a competition of different political and cultural voices. The selection of the ultimate design would be indicative of a major cultural direction that this nation would embark on.

Since Trump became president, there has been an increased level of bigotry, hatred, tension, and violence between groups who define themselves by a variety of "identifiers." These include ideology, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, heritage, sexuality, and ability, each drawing boundaries and erecting fences and walls around to define and defend. We suddenly find ourselves lost in a mine field where "hitting a wall at every turn" takes on a new but twisted meaning. While the "identifiers" can be used to celebrate diversity and "freedom of speech," on the one hand, they are also totally susceptible and exploitable to divisive narratives and practices, capable of being used to generate competition, discrimination, violence, and cultural wars. The Trump Wall builds up not only a border construction between the US-Mexico, but more importantly, raises and restores these cultural and racial walls. If this is how the Trump Wall makes America great again, then we need to question which America he is referring to, and who is in dire need of the Trumpian greatness.

Notes

1. Malini Johar Schueller, "Postcolonial American Studies," *American Literary History* 16, no. 1 (2004): 162. [↗](#)
2. Although I do not entirely agree with Myerson's differentiations, her article helps with an in-depth examination about a wall-building terrain that many had not been aware of before and during the 2016 presidential campaign. Jesse A. Myerson, "Trumpism: It's Coming from the Suburbs – Racism, Fascism and Working-Class Americans," *The Nation*, May 22–29, 2017, <https://www.thenation.com/article/trumpism-its-coming-from-the-suburbs/>. [↗](#)
3. Myerson, "Trumpism." [↗](#)
4. Schueller, "Postcolonial American Studies," 165. [↗](#)

5. James A. Morone, "The Struggle for American Culture," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 29, no. 3 (1996): 425. [↗](#)
6. Schueller, "Postcolonial American Studies," 164. [↗](#)
7. Allen F. Davis, "The Politics of American Studies," *American Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (1990): 355. [↗](#)
8. Schueller, "Postcolonial American Studies," 165. [↗](#)
9. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987), 3. Born in 1942 on the US-Mexico border in the Rio Grande Valley in southern Texas, Anzaldúa's bicultural life and bilingual work personify a never-ending mutual sculpting of the cultural wall and the cultural war. [↗](#)
10. Julia Manchester, "Trump's Border Wall Pledge and Reality," *CNN*, May 4, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/05/03/politics/chain-link-fence-not-the-border-fence/index.html>. [↗](#)
11. Alice Driver, "Trump's Mexico Wall Would Be a Gift to the Drug Cartels," *CNN*, January 9, 2018, <http://www.cnn.com/2018/01/08/opinions/border-wall-cartels-trump-opinion-driver/index.html>. [↗](#)
12. Alice Driver, "Trump's Mexico Wall." [↗](#)
13. Mimi Yang, "Crossing between the Great Wall of China and the 'Great' Trump Wall," *Palgrave Communications* 3, no. 25 (2017), doi:10.1057/s41599-017-0031-2. [↗](#)
14. Helmut Langerbein, "Great Blunders? The Great Wall of China, the Berlin Wall, and the Proposed United States/Mexico Border Fence," *History Teacher* 43, no. 1 (Nov 2009): 9. [↗](#)
15. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mexican%E2%80%93American_War. The paraphrased narration and exact numbers are based on the Wikipedia above. [↗](#)
16. Kara Keeling and Josh Kun, "Introduction: Listening to American Studies," *American Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2011): 446. [↗](#)
17. Keeling and Kun, "Introduction: Listening," 446. [↗](#)
18. Keeling and Kun, "Introduction: Listening," 455. [↗](#)
19. Keeling and Kun, "Introduction: Listening," 455. [↗](#)
20. Keeling and Kun, "Introduction: Listening," 446-447. [↗](#)
21. Keeling and Kun, "Introduction: Listening," 446-447. [↗](#)
22. Keeling and Kun, "Introduction: Listening," 446. [↗](#)
23. Quoted in Keeling and Kun, "Introduction: Listening," 446. [↗](#)
24. Jane C. Desmond and Virginia R. Domínguez, "Resituating American Studies in a Critical Internationalism," *American Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (1996): 475. [↗](#)
25. Desmond and Domínguez, "Resituating American Studies," 476. [↗](#)
26. Desmond and Domínguez, "Resituating American Studies," 476. [↗](#)
27. Deirdre Walsh and Jeremy Herb, "House Approves Spending Bill with \$1.6 Billion for the Border Wall," *CNN*, July 27, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/07/27/politics/spending-bill-vote-border-wall-money/index.html> [↗](#)
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29. Cook, "100 Days." ↗
30. No author, "Designs for Trump's 'powerful' Mexico border wall include drones, watchtowers and a toxic trench filled with nuclear waste," *South China Morning Post*, April 10, 2017, <http://www.scmp.com/news/world/united-states-canada/article/2086420/designs-trumps-powerful-mexico-border-wall-include>. ↗
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32. Cook, "100 Days." ↗
33. Cook, "100 Days." ↗

 Bio



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